

Columbia Downtown

Web Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When Howard County's first design charrette, entitled *Columbia ~ Our Downtown* officially began on October 15, 2005, Howard County Executive James N. Robey welcomed 360 participants and volunteers. Charrette preparations were months in the making and initiated by a nation-wide search for an experienced charrette planning consultant firm.

Precharrette Activities

On August 15, 2005, the County contracted with Design Collective, Inc. (DCI) to facilitate the Columbia Downtown charrette. DCI brings not only international and national design and charrette experience, but also local knowledge of Columbia where the firm was founded and where the principal-in-charge, Matt D'Amico, ALSA, has lived for many years with his family.

DCI immediately began working with the Department of Planning and Zoning (DPZ) to gather information about the Downtown area to be studied. The area is roughly bounded on the east by Lake Kittamaqundi and US 29, on the south by Broken Land Parkway and Little Patuxent Parkway, on the west by Governor Warfield Parkway, and on the north by a Wilde Lake tributary.

During September and early October, DCI interviewed a wide sampling of community members in focus groups, called stakeholder interviews, to identify important issues for the community and to ensure that these issues would be included for discussion during the week of the charrette.

The Charrette

A weeklong series of public events were kicked off Saturday, October 15. At the initial event, a diverse and interested group of residents, business and property owners, and community activists gathered together with elected officials, County staff, DCI and volunteers from the design professions to develop a new vision for Downtown. In a hands-on, collaborative activity, the large group divided into 36 groups of eight to ten people. Each small group developed its own vision for the future of Downtown. Then representatives from each group presented their group's vision before the entire assembly.

During the following week, DCI worked to synthesize and refine the original 36 visions into a single plan. Three public meetings were held to elicit community input and assess the design team's progress in transforming the ideas expressed into a Vision Plan for Downtown.

On Monday, October 17, preliminary concepts for roads and districts were presented to the community for input and review. On Tuesday, October 18, three alternatives for each district were identified. The community divided into small groups to supply feedback on the four internal districts identified by DCI. On Wednesday, October 19, the public reviewed via small

groups a draft master plan based on input and syntheses of the previous public sessions. Finally, on Saturday, October 22, the community assessed the final draft master plan presented by DCI.

As part of the charrette process, a total of 132 surveys were collected from attendees and more surveys continue to be submitted to DPZ by mail and on the Department's web site. Surveys from the closing presentation on October 22 indicate that the most favored elements of the draft final master plan were those relating to pedestrian access and connections, Symphony Woods and The Crescent, the Lakefront, overall design of the plan, and the charrette process itself. Eighty-eight percent of all respondents felt positively about their charrette experience. Issues identified as needing further study include transit, traffic, parking, building heights, affordability, village intra-connectivity, cultural and civic amenities, and open space and other environmental concerns.

Post Charrette Update

DCI is compiling documentation and drawings to summarize the process and its outcome in the form of a Columbia Downtown Master Plan. This includes: a generalized concept plan for Downtown; framework plans for transportation; pedestrian connections and open spaces; an illustrative plan that shows a hypothetical vision for one possible build-out; and more detailed plans for each of the four districts identified. These districts are Warfield Triangle, Lakefront / Little Patuxent Parkway, Corporate Boulevard, and The Crescent / Symphony Woods. The Master Plan also will include Design Guidelines with both requirements and recommendations regarding buildings, streetscapes, parking, architecture and public spaces.

Finally, there will also be a section on implementation that addresses many of the issues of concern raised by participants that could not be addressed during the charrette. DPZ is working on implementation mechanisms for infrastructure, transit, affordable housing, zoning, phasing, monitoring, and funding sources.

All materials will be provided for public review and comment on the County's web site and at public meetings in early 2006.